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RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY 3225
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 1040
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 0911
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL PRIORITY 1488
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE PRIORITY 2090
RHMFIUU/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 1373
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC PRIORITY

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 ASHGABAT 000045

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SENSITIVE
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STATE FOR SCA/CEN

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [TX](#)

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: BITTER COLD SNAP KNOCKS ASHGABAT FOR
A LOOP

11. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

12. (SBU) SUMMARY: Severe cold weather hit Ashgabat and the rest of Central Asia on January 6, and has been challenging the government's ability to keep the city up and operating. The weather has been causing damage to the city's infrastructure, and government authorities are scrambling to ensure the uninterrupted availability of energy resources for domestic consumption. Old and crumbling infrastructure, combined with unwise energy usage practices, are causing irritation among residents, who expect to be provided with state subsidized energy regardless the circumstances. Corruption, in its turn, is also playing a role in disrupting the city's routine. All of this is making city and even national authorities look pretty bad in the eyes of those who live here. END SUMMARY.

13. (SBU) Since January 6, when the temperature at dawn was 5 F, the capital has descended into the worst freeze it has seen in 40 years, according to longtime residents. January temperatures range typically from the upper 20s F at night and 30s or 40s F during the day. Worse, as of January 9, Internet weather reports have lowered their temperature forecasts for the approaching January 11-13 weekend in Ashgabat to range between a low of 4 F and a high of 27 F. The coldest day is forecast for January 12, when the city can expect a low of 4 degrees F and a high of just 18 F.

THE ENERGY CAPITAL BECOMES ENERGY-CHALLENGED

14. (SBU) Many cities around the world are used to handling the problems intrinsic to this kind of cold, but Ashgabat, being a desert capital, is totally unprepared. State-controlled press has totally avoided reports on the negative effects of the cold weather, but did report that the state's export of electricity to Tajikistan was cut in half. Events this week show that the Turkmen government is scrambling to keep up its deliveries of gas and electricity to a population that is used to having these subsidized resources in limitless supply (NOTE: Although the fact that

the supply does not depend on the market has led to periodic power outages through the years. END NOTE.). Some residents have joked that if the government would just shut off the prevalent outdoor lighting that makes the ever-increasing number of Ashgabat's white marble buildings visible from space, there would be enough electricity to keep everyone warm.

15. (SBU) No one thought to turn off the city's ubiquitous fountains. During the coldest temperatures they kept spewing water until they froze solid, although some created spectacular free-form ice structures in the process.

16. (SBU) Water mains that supply the city with water have been rupturing, and short-term black-outs in portions of the city have continuously been reported since January 7. Both the chancery and the Ashgabat International School, buildings designed for short-term use in a desert environment, have had difficulties maintaining heat. The problem is that heating systems were designed to raise the temperature 35 degrees F to room temperature, but not from near zero to room temperature. The school remained closed on January 7 and 8 while alternative heating was installed, and the chancery was able to repair its heating system. Some post housing, such as the homes in the Ustay compound, continue to have serious problems with sub-terrainian water lines freezing.

CORRUPTION REVEALS ITS UGLY FACE

17. (SBU) Buses, generators, and other diesel fuel consumers are having serious problems due to the corrupt practice of "cutting" diesel fuel by adding water to it. Corruption has also delivered a painful lesson to car owners here, who have

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painfully learned their engine coolant and brake fluid are substandard products further diluted with water, now frozen solid.

OLD SOVIET HEATING SYSTEMS CAN'T KEEP PACE

18. (SBU) The Soviet-era apartment buildings, where the great majority live in Ashgabat, receive heat from centralized systems that have been ineffective in fending off single-digit temperatures. Local staff tell us that most of the older apartment buildings are provided with heat by a neighborhood heating plant that delivers hot water or steam to dozens of buildings. The system is inefficient because the plant creates heat that is then transported through pipes to apartments that might be a mile away. In the current cold, the plants have been unable to deliver sufficient heat to apartments in their jurisdictions. In some buildings, the heating system had not been functioning for several years. Residents have reportedly been augmenting the centralized system with a variety of portable electric heaters, which are likely playing a significant role in the electricity shortages now occurring around the city.

19. (SBU) One local resident in a 1960s-era apartment building said residents of her building had been told that no electricity would be available after 9 pm for the foreseeable future, perhaps in an effort to reduce the building's electricity demands. Other local residents have told us that the city has been enforcing a rolling blackout after 9 pm, with various neighborhoods alternating being in the dark. One family without lights TV reported spending their evenings this week sitting around a candle. A resident of another building said different sections of the building had experienced power outages at different times, also suggesting an effort to reduce the building's overall demand, or to reduce residents' use of portable electric heaters. A teacher at the international school who lives in nearby luxury apartments, however, reported that although her building had experienced several power outages over the last few days, it was apparently equipped with backup generators, relatively uncommon here. She said fellow residents told her

that the building is equipped with generators because President Berdimuhamedov,s sister lives there.

UTILITIES INFRASTRUCTURE TAKING A HIT

¶10. (SBU) At least one electrical transformer substation in the city's center caught fire this week, probably from the upsurge of electricity usage, and local residents report the occurrence of many apartment fires due to the overburdening of electrical wiring as well as accidents relating to the use of dangerous natural gas-burning portable heaters. There are also reports that city water mains and natural gas lines have ruptured due to the extreme cold.

¶11. (SBU) City officials appeared to be perplexed and unable to cope with weather-related issues around the city. City buses--full of frozen diesel fuel--failed to appear for passengers the morning of January 7, and someone tasked those poor female street cleaners (known in the Embassy as "street ninjas" because they cover their faces with scarves) literally to sweep the snow off of main streets with their twig brooms. This had little impact on treacherous driving conditions, however, since the initial snowfall from January 6 melted slightly on the roadways and then froze again. There has been no information regarding the potential human toll here, given the loss of life that occurs when such severe weather occurs elsewhere in the world. An Embassy employee driving through an undeveloped area of Ashgabat late the night of January 6 reported seeing a man near the roadway, huddled next to a small fire. It seems likely such extreme cold is taking a tragic toll on Ashgabat,s most poor and destitute.

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YOU DO WHAT YOU NEED TO GET BY

¶12. (SBU) One Embassy dependent noticed a small store in the Mir Bazaar area with its doors wide open despite the bitter cold. When she entered the store, she saw it was being heated by a red hot hotplate placed in the middle of the room.

¶13. (SBU) COMMENT: The severe cold weather is expected to last at least another week and is certain to create more problems for the Turkmen government. Weather problems in the city have revealed that there are more than a few local and national government officials who could (should?) be relieved of duty "for shortcomings in their work." Ashgabat residents were seasoned by life under former President Niyazov to understand that their government does not serve its people. They may, however, become frustrated enough with the government's failure to cope with growing utility problems that are affecting daily life, to finally expect something more. END COMMENT.
HOAGLAND